

And Still They Rise: Exploring the Complexity of Black Women in America

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Black women have been the backdrop and blueprint of civil rights since the beginning of enslavement in America. Keeping the family together when men were sold off during slavery, leading the revolution to freedom, and building communities in the home, school, and church, while staying in the background continues to contribute to the African American women in the United States. When Malcolm X said, “The most disrespected person in America is the Black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the Black woman. The most neglected person in America is the Black woman,” he talked about how often Black women are forgotten and discarded. How, instead of being seen as human, they are created to be hypersexual archetypes such as Jezebels and or domesticated obedient characters like The Mammy, a motherly Black woman who dedicates herself to the White family she works for. In the 1980s and 1990s, Black women were called “Welfare Queens” and painted to be loud, aggressive, demanding, and rude. To understand what’s next for African American women in America, one can look at the past and present and study how the intersectionality of their role in the economy, education, faith, family, and politics all play a part in determining their future.

Black Women and the Family

The enslavement of Black people contributes to the shape of families within the community today. While families were often split up, the father separated from the mother and his children, Black women were left to create communities with one another to raise those left behind and be the head of the household. During the Reconstruction Era, freed slaves found the need to create the Eurocentric idea of family, often known as the nuclear family, comprising a mom, dad, and biological children in one household to separate themselves from the stereotypes created about them. Marriage was introduced as a tool to help Black women shed the stereotypes of being Jezebels and Sapphires by being chaste, domestic, hardworking, and striving for ‘cleanliness’ which often matched the views of “true womanhood.” This White patriarchal system was never meant for Black women to fit in, no matter how

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hard they tried. Instead of studying the breakdown of opportunities in education and economic advancement, they were blamed for the breakdown of Black families for trying to survive.

The cause of breakdown in the past

In the 1910 Census, Black women were more likely to become teenage mothers, stay single, and have marriage instability, which led to female-led households. In Patrick Moynihan's 1965 report, *The Negro Family; the Case for National Action*, the lack of nuclear families hindered the Black-socio-economic progress. In *Still Unmarried: Black Women and Relationship Advice Literature*, Emerald L. Christopher-Byrd examines how racial patriarchal tropes from E. Franklin Fraizer's, "*The Negro Family in the United States*" and Moynihan's "*The Negro Family: the case of National Action*," have been repackaged in relationship-advice books marketed toward heterosexual Black women to help them find love and increase marriage rates. Further, Christopher-Byrd criticizes the arguments as lacking context and research behind why Black women are often the head of their household. When W.E.B Du Bois made the argument that the reason behind people separating is due to the women having to go into the work force contributing to "voluntary separation."

"Many Black women had also had to work outside the home to support their families financially.

Although contemporary scholars have identified the differences between the economic structure of Black and White families, the dominant discourse of the time failed to analyze racial and economic barriers that resulted in both Black men and women working outside the home. This difference in family structure was based on the inability of Black men to earn the same amount as white men, resulting in Black women having to work (Christopher-Byrd, 2019)."

Further, Moynihan also focused on poverty within the Black community, concluding that households led by single Black mothers was a direct cause of the lack of progress made in the Black community, ignoring the structural and institutionalized racism which resulted in policymakers linking behavior, especially

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those targeting Black women, directly to poverty. His report would also go on to focus on his disgust of sex outside of marriage:

“The vast numbers of the unskilled, poorly educated city working class the fabric of conventional social relationships has all but disintegrated, so long as the situation persists, the cycle of poverty and disadvantage will continue to repeat itself (Moynihan, 1965).”

Marriage as a tool doesn’t work for Black women.

One could argue that using marriage as a means of control instead in Black heterosexual marriages where both spouses identify as Black, are less likely to succeed than other races. A Pew Research article published in 2024 stated that Black Americans are less likely than other Americans to be married. About half of the Black population, 48 percent, have never been married compared to 29 percent of non-Black Americans. Black men are more likely to be married at 36 percent vs Black women at 29 percent. Black women are also more likely to divorce than Black men, 25 percent vs 15 percent (see Figure 1). Interviews given in the *African American Voices Project* asked why women were ending their marriages. One person explained, “In relationships, I am forced to be much more submissive and appear less capable to keep the peace.” Another divorced woman added that they found it “difficult to give myself up,” alluding to them needing to change who they are or shrink themselves to fit into a mold. happiness and satisfaction are also lower compared to their White counterparts. It is important to note, when comparing White and Black married couples, especially White and Black wives in marriages, the comparison is viewed through a White culture lens, which Black women rarely fit into. Even relationship books that address how women should think like a man or mold themselves to become “wife material” play on the same rhetoric of the past. As we continue to see Black women become more educated, strive to break economic barriers, and continue to fight for civil rights, the number of Black women having their own nuclear family is likely to decline or stay the same.

Black Women and Education

Education has been a tool in African American communities for survival. Once killed for learning how to read and write, enslaved Africans in the United States had to find ways to achieve higher education without their slave masters finding out. Despite roadblocks during the Jim Crow Era, key Supreme Court Cases such as *Brown v Board of Education*, which overturned *Plessey vs Ferguson*, and allowed integration theoretically provided opportunities for African Americans to obtain higher levels of education than in the past. Even if the road hasn't been easy, Black women are outpacing Black men and their counterparts in education.

Higher education and political freedom

Higher education for Black women was more than learning to read, write, and count. Attending colleges was a way for Black women to speak about ongoing issues like race and gender equality. Even though Black women weren't afforded the same freedom to vote with the passage of the 15th Amendment, their achievement in education helped get Black men elected in Congress so they could introduce laws in hopes of helping oppressed people. Many were educated outside of the South, like Oberlin College, created by abolitionists who admitted Black women on the same basis as White men, and at Ivy League equivalent institutions called "Seven Sisters Colleges." African Americans in the South, where 90 percent of the total population lived, found it difficult to find proper high schools for Black people except in major cities before World War II. (Perkins, 2015) This did not, however, stop them from pursuing education, and according to educational historian James D. Anderson, illiteracy rates of former enslaved Africans dropped 95 percent in 1860 to 30 percent in 1910. Black women expanded their education from teacher-training programs created to address the lack of Black teachers for Black students to nursing, social work, library sciences, and graduate degrees in various fields, continuing to use their education as a tool to fight for political freedom.

Learning despite disapproval

While higher educational pursuits are usually met with praise and admiration, Black women have been met with disapproval and “concern” from those in their community. In *Bound to Them by a Common Sorrow: African American Women, Higher Education, and Collective Advancement*, author Linda Perkins highlights the danger in Ebony magazine’s feature, “*The Black Woman*.” The article stated the advancement of education by Black women was done, “at the expense of the psychological health of the Negro male who has frequently been forced by circumstances into the position of a drone,” and recommended that African American women “put the past behind them” and assume a subservient role to their men and focus on homemaking and community work.

“The message was clear that African American women should accept without question the norms of the 'prevailing society.' No African American woman would balk at her husband earning a salary that reflected his training and education. However, the danger in the Ebony editorial was that it discouraged African American women from obtaining advanced education, and certainly not one that exceeded her husband. (Perkins, 2015)”

Despite pushback, Black women continue to pursue higher education without signs of slowing down. In 2023, 27% of Black adults ages 25 and older – 8.2 million people – had earned at least a bachelor’s degree. Of the total, 30.1% of Black women ages 25 and older had earned at least a bachelor’s degree, about double the amount of those in 2000 (15.4%) (see Figure 2).

Black Women and the Economy

Black women have always trailed behind their White counterparts economically. Though civil rights opened numerous opportunities for Black women to advance in society, nothing was done to undo the institution and structure designed to suppress non-White people. This is why, though Black women are working in spaces once prohibited, the growth of Black women economically is slow to progress.

Defining and discovering the meaning of wealth

Authors Yvonne D. Newsome and F. Nii-Amoo Dodoo look at the economy for Black women in the 1980s in their article, *Reversal of Fortune: Explaining the Decline in Black Women's Earnings*. The high school completion rate between 1980 and 1990 among Black women aged 25 to 64 rose from 51.3 percent to 66.1 percent, with college attendance increasing from 8.1 to 10.1 percent. (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2000. see Figure 3). "According to human capital theory, Black women's higher educational attainment should have been associated with earnings gained. Yet, the 1980s recession and other societal changes have worsened Black women's economic circumstances." Also noted are the policy changes set forth by the Reagan and Bush administrations that impacted how Black women made money. The reduction of federal subsidies for social programs, which was a safety net for lower-income and unemployed people, disrupted how people, especially Black women, kept their families afloat. The administration also eliminated grant-funded public jobs, which were held by middle-class Black women, so while the majority were gaining in human capital, a sizable portion of Black women were deeply impacted negatively (Newsome & Dodoo, 2002).

Hard to determine the future.

In June 2023, the Supreme Court overturned affirmative action for colleges, and two years later, in 2025, the Trump administration put an end to diversity, equality, and inclusion (DEI) practices on a federal level that have trickled into private sectors (Ending Radical And Wasteful Government DEI

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Programs, 2025), reversing little progress made in the 1960s and 1970s. While Moynihan's report about Black women working being the cause of the breakdown of the Black family, he also notes that the economic system was set to prevent Black people from succeeding. Two-thirds of Black Americans surveyed agreed with him, saying it was designed a great deal (39%) or fair amount (26%). About a quarter (23%) say it was designed to hold Black people back somewhat, and 11% say it was not designed to hold Black people back much or at all (see Figure 4) (Cox, 2024). The most logical explanation for the lag of economic growth or catchup with Black women is institutional and structural racism. Because of decades of inequality, African Americans are much less likely to receive wealth from their parents or other relatives to pay for college, to start a business, or to make a down payment on a home, having to incur more debt to catch up to other non-Black groups.

Black Women and Religion

Enslaved people were forced to go to church by their enslavers to learn obedience and subordination. Often invisible rather than visible, enslaved women combined practices to help them cope with the pain inflicted on them by their slave owners. What many enslaved people found through religion was resistance to slavery, singing spirituals which combined African traditions with Christianity. Often, spirituals included various motions, hand claps, and head tosses for at least 30 minutes without stopping (known today as praise and worship), providing stress relief and sharing their grief that inspired empathy and hope. The role for enslaved women was often seen as subordinate yet still pivotal for spiritual foundation within the community. From teaching spirituals often sung in church to playing a pivotal role in building community through their missionary work, much of the survival of the Black church rested on their shoulders. Today, the role of spirituality and religion continues to play a significant part in Black women's lives. The same concerns enslaved African women prayed and worked through (separation, sexual abuse, and destruction of African culture) during captivity are the same

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concerns Black women face today, thus creating a way for them to express themselves while honoring their ancestral roots.

Pivitol yet forgotten

A common theme with Black women in America is how pivotal their presence is woven in the fabric of our civil liberties, yet often looked over and forgotten. In *My Mother's God is Mine*, Cheryl Townsend Gilkes notes, "*Jesus, Jobs, and Justice* makes clear that we can no longer explore African American life and culture as historians and social scientists without affirmatively and diligently placing women at the center of our descriptions and analyses." The intersectionality of religion and politics also helped Black women highlight the need to garner the same rights Black men and White women gained before them. The National Association of Colored Women's Clubs, its regional associations, and local affiliates, in addressing poor and working class African Americans' everyday problems, utilized the interracial contacts and networks they established to promote a common religious agenda. (Gilkes, 2011). When Robert F. Kennedy called for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to be released from jail in Georgia, it was his wife, Coretta Scott King, who put together a coalition of people to visit Black churches campaigning for John F. Kennedy's presidency (The Kennedys and the Civil Rights Movement, n.d.). Before this, most Black people (men) voted Republican. With Nixon's silence on Dr. King's arrest and Kennedy's outreach, many Black Americans saw his presidency as a way to expand civil rights, including but not limited to expanding voting rights for Black women. Kennedy would go on to win the election with 68 percent of the Black vote.

Womanism as an act of reclaiming

Black feminism, or womanism, allows Black women to redefine their womanhood against the stereotypes established during slavery and segregation. Strongly influenced by a theology of liberation, much of womanist scholarship defines the health of the person and the community as the absence of oppression. This emphasis on the notion that God identifies with and liberates the oppressed is a central

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theme of the womanist religious perspective. Much like during enslavement, today, the church provides spiritual renewal and empowerment. In Black churches, women have the freedom to receive and exhibit the Holy Spirit as a healing resource during their trials and tribulations. Shouting, screaming, and jumping continue to be the expression of emotion that offers an outlet for pent-up anguish. (Musgrave, Allen, & Allen, 2002)

Black Women and Politics

Black women have prioritized justice for their race and society over justice for their gender. Unfortunately, this has led to Black women receiving freedoms last and often discarded by those who were supposed to be allies. Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, leaders of the Women's suffrage movement in the 1880s, featured White suffragists and ignored the contributions of African American suffragists even though they played a pivotal role in the 15th and 19th amendments being passed. Even though Black women are often the most marginalized, they remain politically active, playing a leading role in expanding access to civil rights for all communities.

Putting themselves last for everyone else

There seems to be a theme when studying Black women in America: they are the foundation of progress yet rarely benefit from it. From economics to politics, Black women have been the trailblazers in the push for the civil rights of oppressed people. Since the days of enslavement, Black women like Harriet Tubman helped lead the rebellion against their enslavers to freedom. After Emancipation, Black women continued to fight for voting rights and the ability to be declared citizens in a country they were forced to work in. While obtaining advanced degrees in higher education, Black women are not awarded the ability to work in positions of power with fairness like their White counterparts. And while the matriarch is what kept families together during slavery, it is often Black women who are blamed for the "fall of the nuclear family" in the Black community. And yet, Black women continue to put their need for

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civil liberties to the side and focus on human rights and universal suffrage. Activist Mary Ann Shadd Cary supported the Fifteenth Amendment while being critical of it not giving women the right to vote. Sojourner Truth also argued that Black women would continue to face discrimination and prejudice unless their voices were uplifted like those of Black men. In terms of reproductive rights, Black women continue to get pushback by those in their community, especially Black men. Leith Mullings's article, *Mapping Gender in African-American Political Strategies*, notes the reactions of leaders who denounce a woman's right to birth control and abortion.

Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association issued a resolution in 1934 condemning the use of birth control for African Americans. The pronouncement of Louis Farrakhan, national leader of the Nation of Islam, that "when the black woman kills her unborn child, she is murdering the advancement of her nation" is a logical consequence of Elijah Muhammad's view that "the woman is man's field to reproduce his nation (Mulling, 2019).

What often gets ignored, as mentioned above, is that the fight for Black women is a fight for all. Black women have everyone else's back; when will people have theirs?

All hands on deck

In November 2020, Kamala Harris became the first Black and South Asian woman to be sworn in as vice president, thus being the only one to serve at the executive level. Before then, she was the first South Asian and second Black woman to be elected as senator of California in 2016. On paper, it makes sense that she would only then become president of the United States, considering she is one of few politicians to have served in every branch of government, and yet, she lost the election in 2024 to Donald J. Trump, a 34-time convicted felon twice impeached. (Sisak, Peltz, Tucker, Price, & Colvin, 2024) When asked why, many will blame the ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestine. Others will blame the cost of eggs and gas as their reason for not voting for Harris. While those decisions may hold truth,

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let's look deeper. Women running for office are targeted more with hate and disinformation. A study in 2020 saw that gendered abuse affected 12 of 13 research subjects, while nine out of 13 subjects were targeted with gendered disinformation narratives.

The overwhelming majority of recorded keywords relating to abuse and disinformation were identified on Twitter and directed toward then-Senator, now Vice President Kamala Harris, who accounted for 78% of the total amount of recorded instances. (Jankowicz, Hunchak, Pavliuc, Davies, & Kaufmann, 2021)

When studying exit polls, White women favored Donald Trump during his elections, 52 percent in 2016 and 53 percent in 2024, versus Black women who voted for Secretary Hilary Clinton in 2016 and Vice President Harris in 2024, 94 percent vs 92 percent respectfully. This illustrates how, even though Black women fight universally for human rights, White women are apprehensive to letting another woman lead, especially a woman of color, slowing down the progress and advancement of civil rights (see Figure 5). Black women, on the other hand, not only show up at the polls but are running for office in increasing numbers. Currently, 29 Black women serve in Congress, including two Black women serving in the Senate at the same time.

“I might be the first, but I won’t be the last.” – Vice President Kamala Harris
It’s hard to determine the future of Black women in politics. One thing’s for sure: the history of Black women in America is that they never give up. The fight against injustice continues at all levels: federal, state, and local.

Conclusion: And still, we rise

Black women cannot be put into a box. The idea of Eurocentric patriarchy has not and will never fit the idea of Black women. Since the enslavement of Africans, women have been the backbone of their communities, even when it’s not appreciated. Institutional and structural racism may prevent economic advancement and “catch-up” of White counterparts, Black women keep their family and communities

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together, whether it's stepping up financially or promoting education and carving a path for those to follow. Though Black women come up short politically, they continue to speak up and vote on universal human rights, knowing they will be the last to benefit. Religion continues to be the tool to connect different components and release the tension of feeling the world on their shoulders so they can keep going. By calling on the rituals of the past, Black women stay connected and grounded to their roots, purposely avoiding the box they are constantly forced to fit in.

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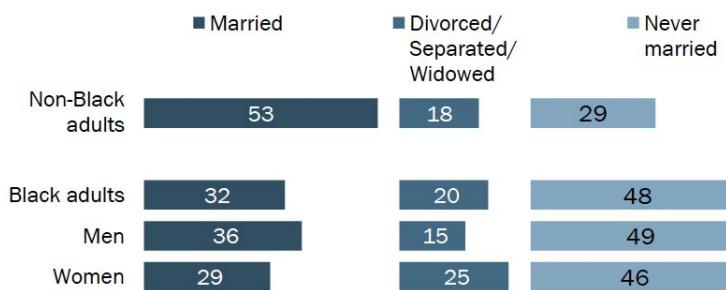
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Figure 1

Black men in the U.S. are more likely than Black women to be married

Among U.S. adults, % who were ___ in 2023



Note: Adults are ages 18 and older. "Black adults" refers to those who self-identify as Black, including single-race Black, multiracial Black and Black Hispanic people. "Non-Black adults" include those who do not identify as Black, whether alone or in combination with other races or Hispanic identity.

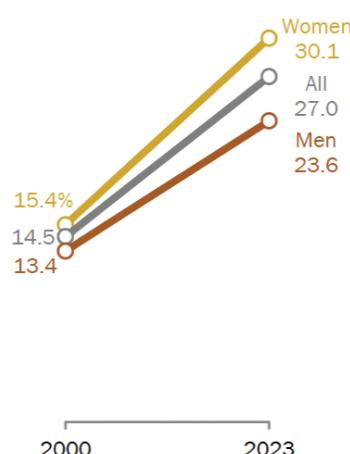
Source: Pew Research Center tabulations of the 2023 American Community Survey (IPUMS).

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Figure 2

The share of Black women with a bachelor's degree doubled since 2000

% of U.S. Black population ages 25 and older with a bachelor's degree or higher



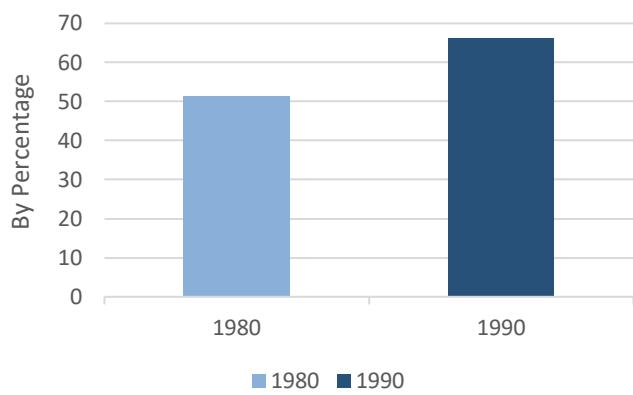
Note: "U.S. Black population" refers to all people who self-identify as Black, including single-race Black, multiracial Black and Black Hispanic people.

Source: Pew Research Center tabulations of the 2000 decennial census (5% IPUMS) and 2023 American Community Survey (IPUMS).

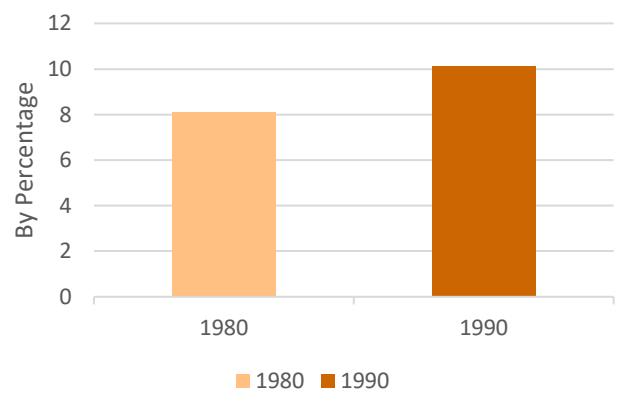
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Figure 1

High School Completion Rate



College Attendance



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Figure 2

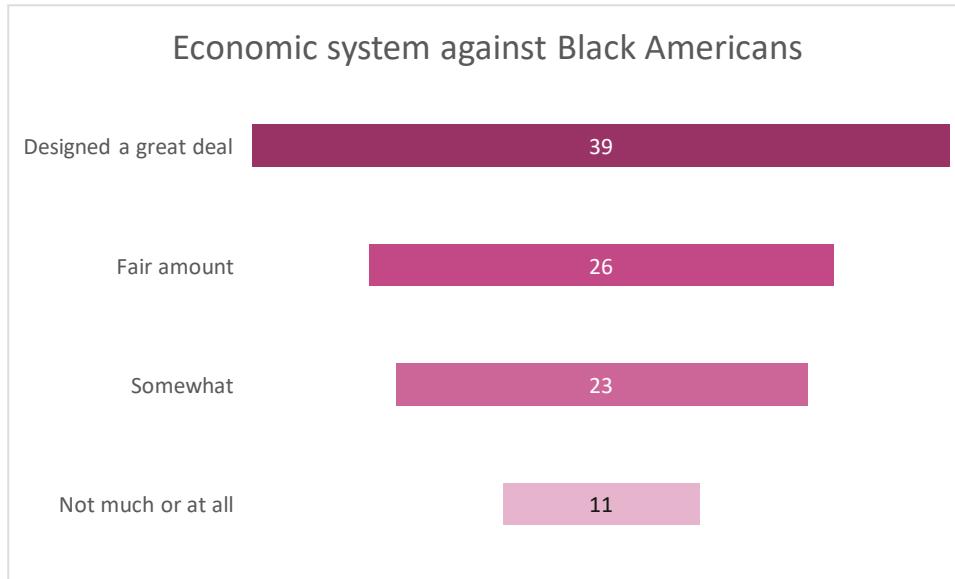


Figure 3

